DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 206 611 SP 018 861

AUTHOR Slack, Trevor
TITLE Cuba's Political Involvement in Sport Since the Socialist Revolution.
PUB DATE Jun 81
NOTE 15p.: Paper presented at the CAHPER Conference (Vancouver, British Columbia, June 11, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Athletics; *Competition; Foreign Policy; *International Relations; Mass Media; Political Power; *Political Socialization; *Propaganda; Social Behavior
IDENTIFIERS *Cuba

ABSTRACT

This paper documents instances of Cuba's political use of sport internally and internationally. The linking of sport and politics is manifested in the number of times that pictures of Castro, involved in sport, appear in the Cuban media. This is pointed out as the two-fold desire of the politician to secure a virile media image and to mold the political consciousness of spectator groups. While this linkage of sport and politics is not confined to countries such as Cuba, the use of sport as a means of highlighting the successes of a country's political system appears to be unique to socialist governments. Examples are given of Cuba's use of sports as political tools in international events, such as the Pan American, Central American, and Olympic Games. It is noted that in addition to her political use of sport, Cuba has one of the fastest developing sports programs in the world. Consequently, whatever feelings or political biases exist, much may be learned by studying Cuban sports programs. (JD)

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Cuba's Political Involvement in Sport Since The Socialist Revolution

by

Trevor Slack

The University of Alberta

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A Paper Presented at the 1981 CAHPER Conference, Vancouver, B.C. June 11th 1981.

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Introduction

Sport everywhere reflects the dominant values of the society in which it exists and consequently it is seldom, if ever, free from politics. In spite of the inextricable links between sport and politics, many sport purists still question this union.The chief targets for those who attack the use of sport for political purposes have been the Socialist countries.[1] Cuba has been no exception to the rule, and in her short history since the revolution there have been several instances illustrating Cuba's political use of sport.

The purpose of this paper is to document these instances. The paper will be divided into two parts. The first of these will deal with Cuba's political use of sport internally and the second will consider Cuba's political use of sport internationally.

Political Use of Sport Internally

For those who have studied the sport situation of Cuba the predominant linkage of sport and polity is manifest in the number of times that pictures of Castro, involved in sport, appear in books and periodicals.[2] There are also several references to Castro's prowess as an athlete. Sobel (1978, p.9) relates the fact that "in 1944 his fellow students named him the best athlete at the Colegio Belen, a Jesuit preparatory school in Havana". Pickering (1978, p.147) notes that Castro is "a former national squad basketball player" and Griffiths (1979, p.259) reports that he (Castro) "as a student played basketball and baseball to international level and still misses no opportunity to don vest and shorts and get on to the pitch". Howard Stenzel (1977, p.296) in his book Baseball and the Cold War recounts that the Washington Post reporter Joe Cambria, once the chief Washington Senator's scout in Cuba, scouted and rejected a pitcher named Fidel Castro! The Cuban leader is also noted for his unannounced arrivals at a variety of sporting events (Davis, 1980).

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[1] These critics generally ignore the fact that the capitalist or so called free-world countries have often done the same. It is not the author's intent in this paper to argue as to who does and who does not use sport for political ends nor even to address the question as to whether this is an acceptable use of sport. The fact that sport and politics are linked is not questioned. This paper will merely cite instances of Cuba's apparent involvement in sport for political ends.

[2] See for example

1. Pictures of Castro playing baseball
   a. Lockwood, L. Castro's Cuba, Cuba's Fidel. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967, p.167.
   b. Ortiz, V. The Land and People of Cuba. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1973, p.80.
2. Pictures of Castro playing basketball - Haverstock, N.A. and Hoover, J.P. Cuba in Pictures. New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 1974, p.53.
3. Castro honouring volleyball player Semanario Deportivo. No. 772, 1977, p.18.

In an attempt to analyze the linkages between the institutions of sport and polity, Petrie (1975, p.192) suggests:

> the political attachment to sport appears related to the two-fold desire of the politician to: (a) secure a media image as a virile individual capable of withstanding the physical pressures of office and (b) mold the political consciousness of spectator groups.

While it is doubtful that the domestic media would portray their Maximo Lider as anything but "a virile individual capable of withstanding the physical pressures of office", it would appear that the message of Castro's athletic prowess is being conveyed to the foreign media by his repeated association with athletes and his image as an athlete himself. The imposing figure of the Cuban leader, more than six feet tall and over two hundred and fifty pounds, serves to enhance the image that the media creates. Pickering (1978, p.147) suggests that "Castro's personal charisma is very closely linked to his identity with sportsmen and women". This portrayal of Castro in the company of successful athletes also serves several other political functions. First it provides the leader with continuous publicity and second it helps to promote an image that his followers may aspire to emulate.

Petrie's second point, that politicians use sport to mold the political consciences of spectators at sporting events, is evidenced in Cuba by the ever present pictures and slogans that appear at these events.[3] The pictures are usually of Castro himself or of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, an Argentinian revolutionary, former rugby player, and at one time Castro's, right-hand man. Through this subtle use of sport as a political tool the spectator masses become conscious or sub-conscious recipients of the political message which the revolutionary leaders are attempting to convey to them. As Petrie (1975,p.199) suggests the politician is enhancing his own image with the spectator masses and also it is possible to use the events themselves as foci of patriotic and policy statements. This latter point is exemplified in Castro's speech to athletes returning from the 1971 Pan American Games. The Cuban leader not only expressed "the happiness and the pride of the Cuban people in the successes attained by their athletic delegation in the Pan American competition" but he also used the occasion to criticize the United States Imperialism as "the one that has tried to humiliate, has tried to create an inferiority complex in the

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[3] See
1. Semanario Deportivo. No. 716-717, 1976, pp.4,37.
2. Semanario Deportivo. No. 811, 1978, p.21.
3. Kirshenbaum, Jerry. "El Caballo is off and running" Sports Illustrated. August 29th, 1977 - Reference is made to "the inevitable photo of Che Guevara" in Juantorena's house.
4. Ward, Fred. "Inside Cuba Today" National Geographic. Vol. 151, No.1, January 1977, p.47.

Latin American people". (Castro, 1971, p.1711) Also in this speech, Castro praised the educational programs he had initiated and expounded on a number of his other political endeavors. He has constantly used the increasing success of Cuba's athletes as a parallel to the success of his leadership of the revolution. The following statement in which he speaks of pre and post revolutionary sporting victories, provides evidence of this point:

> With the exception of a tiny handful of outstanding Cuban athletes who had occasionally won medals, Cuba had hardly ever won any medals in competition. Yet nowadays we win medals in Central American, Pan American and even Olympic competitions. . . I can assure you that one of the things most admired by our Latin American neighbors is our sporting success. We can say that our athletes are the children of our revolution and, at the same time the standard bearers of that revolution (Castanes, 1975).

It would appear then that the political use of sport is manifested internally in Cuba in three ways. First, there are strong attempts by the media to highlight Castro's athletic prowess and his frequent associations with athletes. Second, there is a more subtle linking of sport and polity exhibited by the presence of political pictures and slogans at athletic events. The final linkage of sport and politics relates to the use of sport as a means of highlighting the successes of the country's political system.

It should be mentioned that all of these political uses of sport do occur in the so called free-world countries. The first two are particularly prevalent; however, the third method would seem to occur less frequently and with less intensity than it does in Cuba and other socialist countries.

Political Use of Sport Internationally

Cuba's position in the international sports arena has improved dramatically since the 1959 Revolution. This improvement has led to the Cuban government's use of sport as a means of exemplifying the successes of the revolution. Attempts have also been made to use success in sports as a means of reinforcing, at home and abroad, the socialist ideologies of the Marxist-Leninist Regime. As a result of this political manipulation of sport, there have been several controversial incidents between Cuba and other sporting nations. This section of the paper will attempt to highlight these incidents.

Following the revolution, Cuba competed in the 1959 Pan American Games in Chicago and placed 11th (Griffiths, 1979, p.256). In the Rome Olympic Games of 1960 Cuba did not win any medals and placed 45th in the unofficial national points standings (Facts on File, 1960, p.315).

In 1961 an incident took place which, although unrelated to sport, would ultimately affect the future of Cuba and consequently the future of sport. The incident occurred on April 17th at the Playa Giron or the Bay of Pigs. A group of Cuban exiles, heavily supported and financed by the American Central Intelligence Agency, attempted to recapture Cuba. The operation was over in less than three days, and much to the embarassment of the United States the exiles were easily defeated. Following the Bay of Pigs the United States' government cut off all trade with Cuba. This move brought economic problems to the island as the United States was her chief buyer of sugar. The United States blockade was supported by other western countries and was to have serious ramifications for sport. Pickering (1978, p.146) notes:

> the blockade meant limited competition, and a complete lack of sophisticated sports equipment or sport exchanges with neighboring countries. In effect this meant exclusion from almost all the area and regional championships which particularly affected sports like the Cuban national game of baseball confined as it is mainly to the Americas and Japan.

The severing of relations with Cuba by the United States and other western countries opened the way for increased relationships with socialist countries, and in particular the Soviet Union. The USSR was quick to establish diplomatic relations with Cuba and it became one of Cuba's major trading partners as well as giving military support to the island. The relationships established with the Soviet Union and other eastern bloc countries were to affect sport, and Pickering (1978, p.146) points out that "the Soviet Union. . . was quick to establish its own sports aid with coaches and advisors who were sent to set up training and teaching programs". The increased sporting relationships with the Soviet Union and other eastern bloc countries has undoubtedly helped Cuba's continual improvement in the standard of sport and also shaped the role that sport plays in society. In 1962 the Central American Games were held in Jamaica. Cuba finished third with 52 medals, 12 of these being gold. In the 1964 Olympic Games Cuba's Enrique Figuerola won the country's only medal, a silver in the 100 metres.[4]

In 1966 the Central American Games were to be held in Puerto Rico and in spite of the blockade the Cubans indicated their intention to take part. The Puerto Ricans would not issue the Cubans visas nor would they guarantee the safety of the Cubans during the games. To ensure that they were able to gain access into Puerto Rico the Cubans decided not to fly their team, but to send them by ship to Puerto Rico. The ship selected for the voyage was the Cerro Pelando. She met with a hostile reception in San Juan and Cuban athletes and officials were continually harassed during the games. Cuba was, however, to dominate the games finishing first in the

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[4] Figuerola is currently Presidente de la Federacion de Athletismo de Cuba.

medal tables with a total of 190 medals, 96 gold, 33 silver, and 61 bronze.

In the 1968 Olympic Games held in Mexico City the Cuban athletes won four silver medals, one of these was won by the Mens 4x100 metre relay team. Following the black power demonstration by Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the Cuban relay team sent their medals to Harry Edwards, founder of "the Olympic Project for Human Rights". When Smith and Carlos were sent home by the I.O.C. Cuba extended invitations to them (Espy, 1979, p.120).

At the 1970 Central American Games which were held in Panama, the Cubans once again travelled by ship. Juan Diaz, a Cuban defector and formerly a trainer with the Cuban cycling team, suggested to the United States Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security that the use of the ship was merely to put on "a big show" when the Cuban athletes arrived in Panama. Diaz also suggested that the ship which was used, the Victoria de Giron, was selected specifically for its name which would convey a propaganda message.[5] The games at Panama were totally dominated by the Cubans with a total of 363 medals, 207 of which were gold. Mexico was second with 124 medals, 38 of which were gold. The Cuban participation in the games was fraught with controversy. Sobel (1978, p.55) reports the following incidents:

> A group of Cubans was reported to have distributed pro-Castro propaganda and made political speeches in defiance of orders by games' officials prohibiting such action; Rafael Arguelles, a member of the Cuban soccer team, defected March 6 and sought political asylum at a Latin American Embassy; the defection of Jorge Wilson, a Cuban high jumper, was reported after he sought asylum in the United States Embassy March 9; a brawl erupted when a United States referee disqualified a Cuban long distance walker; and numerous charges of professionalism were leveled at the Cuban delegation.

The 1971 Pan American Games held in Cali, Colombia were similarly fraught with controversies involving Cuban athletes. At the opening ceremonies of the games the Cuban team marched past the Columbian people and on the signal of the then President of INDER, Jorge Garcia Bango, the Cuban athletes and officials threw the red berets they were wearing to the crowd. The August 6, 1971 issue of the Communist magazine Bohemia showed a picture of the throwing of the berets. The picture caption read "Hundreds of red berets cleaved through the air and the message between the two people became vibrant again." Jose Diaz Hernandez, a Cuban fencer who defected to the United States during the games, testified before the United States Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security that the berets contained pieces of paper on which were "some thoughts of Castro and Marti and Che Guevara in Bolivia". As well as Hernandez, three other Cubans defected, seeking asylum in the Panamanian Embassy in Columbia (Sobel,

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[5] The term Playa Giron is another name for the Bay of Pigs.

1978, p.55). Another unnamed defector "fell" or was pushed from a balcony to his death on the floor below (United States Senate, 1971, p.1708). While the games were taking place a United States gymnast, James P. Culhane, Jnr. of New Haven, was attacked by a number of Cuban athletes. Culhane was removing a flag of Cali intending to take it for a souvenir, when some Cuban athletes appeared and thought Culhane had taken down their flag. The Cubans attacked and beat Culhane and he required 8 stitches to his eye. It was suggested by Senator Edward J. Gurney of Florida (United States Senate, 1971, p. 1687) that "the incident was deliberately created to bolster the morale of the team which had suffered considerably because of the defection of four of its members".

Despite the incidents involving Culhane and the Cubans at Cali, the United States State Department announced on August 5, 1971 that a United States Volleyball team had been given official clearance to travel from Cali to compete in Cuba. The twelve man team, along with coaches and officials, would compete in the pre-Olympic North American Zone Volleyball Championships. The party, totalling 20, would constitute the largest group of United States athletes to visit Cuba since the revolution. The U.S. State Department reported that their actions were "not a departure from previous policy" and that it was the policy of the United States "to permit United States' teams to go to Cuba and participate in international competition" (Sobel, 1978, p.45). The New York Times (August 14, 1971) reported that the trip to Cuba "comes at a crucial time in United States-Cuba relations as American officials ponder a softening attitude toward the Castro regime". It also reported that the first signs of new Cuba which greeted the Americans at the airport were "large photographs of Che Guevara the revolutionary and a montage of pictures and graphs extolling the virtues of social reform and industrial progress under the Castro government". The volleyball team's stay in Cuba was accomplished without any political repercussions and several years later another attempt was made to bridge United States-Cuba relationships in sport.

This particular venture was of a more commercial nature than the one in 1971 and it involved a baseball game. Baseball is the national sport of Cuba and before the Castro regime several Cuban players such as, Tony Perez, Mike Cuellar, Bert Campaneris, Jose Cardenal and Tito Fuentes, had become successful playing professional baseball in the United States (Fimrite, 1977, p.77). Since the revolution, Cuban baseball players have been prevented by their government from playing in the professional leagues but have won the 1971 and 1973 World Amateur

Championships. Two independent television producers, Barry Jagoda and Richard Cohen, along with support of Baseball Commissioner, Bowie Kuhn, proposed to send a group of major-leaguers to Havana to play a Cuban all-star team. The games were scheduled to be held in Havana on March 21 and 22, 1976. ABC Television had agreed to buy the broadcast rights for $165,000. The Ford Administration and Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, rejected the idea of the games. The reasons given by Kissinger for not supporting the games were "because of Cuba's military involvement in the Angolian Civil War, the Castro government's persistent support of Puerto Rican independence and Cuba's vote in favour of. . . the United States resolution that declared Zionism a form of racism" (Creamer, 1975, p.9). Creamer suggests that the aforementioned reasons were merely excuses and that State Department officials had revealed that Ford was reluctant to make "a sporting gesture of friendship to Cuba at a time when it might cost him conservative votes in Republican Presidential primaries next February and March."

Shortly after the United States-Cuba baseball fiasco took place another Cuban athlete was to make history and draw the attention of the world to the sporting successes of the tiny island. On Sunday, July 25, 1976 Alberto Juantorena became the first non-English speaking athlete to win the Olympic 800 metres title. Juantorena's time of 1 minute, 43.5 seconds was a new World and Olympic record. Four days after his victory in the 800 metres, Juantorena won his second gold medal in the 400 metres. A graduate in Economics from the University of Havana, Juantorena was very much a political animal and at the press conference following his victory in the 800 metres, he told reporters "I dedicate this gold medal to Fidel Castro and the revolution" (Athletics Weekly, 1976, p.21). When he returned to Cuba, Juantorena personally presented his 800 metres gold medal to Castro stating:

> It is necessary to think of the revolution as having created everything, including our victories in sports. The revolution created the necessary material conditions, health care and facilities. I am proud of the revolution (Kirshenbaum, 1977, p.29).

The success of Juantorena and his fellow Cubans in Montreal did much to draw the public's attention to Cuba at a time when the United States government was attempting to improve relations with Cuba. On March 9, 1977 President Jimmy Carter announced that he would end travel restrictions to Cuba. In reply Cuban President Fidel Castro stated he was very interested in improving relations with the United States and one of his suggestions was that United States athletic teams visit Cuba for friendly competitions. Castro had originally invited defending American League Champions, the New York Yankees, to play a Cuban team in Havana. In March 1977 Baseball Commissioner Bowie Kuhn said he would send an all-star team but that

there may not be enough time to assemble a team before the United States baseball season opened in April. President Jimmy Carter also indicated to Castro that it was feasible to arrange an exhibition baseball game involving the Yankees. The Yankees were, however, not destined to play in Cuba; instead a team of basketball players from South Dakota would visit Cuba and play two games. This was to be the first cultural exchange between the two countries since the Cuban revolution. It was also the largest group of Americans to visit the island since the 1961 Bay of Pigs incident. The trip was arranged by Democratic Senator James Abourezk, who told reporters "that he hoped the end result of these sport exchanges would be the normalization of relations with Cuba" (New York Times, April 5, 1977). The group that went to Cuba consisted of 90 basketball players, relatives of players, reporters, and diplomats; included in the latter category was former presidential candidate George McGovern. The rationale for sending a team made up of two relatively weak university teams, University of South Dakota and South Dakota State University, never became clear. The United States State Department's theory appeared to be that sending a relatively weak team which the Cubans would probably defeat would smooth relations between the countries and it would also mean that the Americans would not lose face at home as everyone would know the team sent was not a strong representative. The Cubans won both games; the first by a score of 91-72 and the second 88-69. The Coliseum in which the games were played was full to its 15,000 seat capacity both nights. The spectators were workers who had "earned their free tickets by producing better and faster than employees in other factories, schools and shops" (New York Times, April 7, 1977). Although the games were not a success in terms of victories on the court, several newspaper articles reported that the trip was a diplomatic success and tentative arrangements were made for the Cuban team to visit South Dakota.

As yet, the Cuban basketball team has not visited the United States but in the spring of 1979 eight Cuban athletes and four officials did visit to compete in the UCLA-Pepsi Invitational Track and Field Meet. Although the Cubans did not win any of the events (Alejandro Casanas was beaten by Renaldo Nehemiah in the high hurdles, Juantorena finished 3rd in the 400 metres and Silvio Leonard finished 2nd in the 100 metres and 4th in the 200 metres) it would appear that the Cubans enjoyed the meet and looked optimistically to future relationships between the two countries. Self-appointed spokesman for the team, Juantorena, told reporters "I hope to come back for a meet in June. It is good for me to run in this country. I think our relations will get

better and better" (Putnam, 1979, p.39). Another Cuban sporting exchange that took place in 1979 involved Canada. Jorge Garcia Bango, at that time head of INDER, and the then Canadian Minister of Sport, Iona Campagnolo, signed an agreement that would see competition between the two countries in seventeen different sports (Champion, March 1979, p.3).

In addition to sending a number of their international athletes overseas to countries such as the United States and Canada, Cuba has also hosted several world championships and international sporting events. One of the largest and most politically orientated of these was the 11th World Festival of Youth and Students held in Havana in July 1978. The event was reported to have attracted over 18,000 delegates from 145 countries (Sport in the USSR, 1978, p.32). The program of events lasted nine days and included "a grand total of 1,209 activities such as solidarity meetings, press conferences by leading statesmen and public figures, numerous gatherings, symposiums and discussions, concert performances, exhibitions, carnivals, and sports competitions"(Sport in the USSR, 1979,p.35). Among the sport competitions held were a gymnastic parade in which 14,700 Cuban gymnasts participated, a 1,000 board chess tournament, a Festival Mile Run(1,978 metres) and "Ready for Victory" tests. Many top sportsmen and women from socialist countries were present at the festival, these included; Renate Stetcher, Alberto Juantoreno, Ludmila Bragina and Alexander Zaitsev.

There have been several criticisms of Cuba's political involvement in sport other than those highlighted in this paper. During the 1971 Pan American Games in Cali, Colombia, Neil Amdur of the New York Times wrote an article (Sunday, August 8, 1971) under the byline "Russians Coach Cubans at Pan American Games". In the article Amdur outlined how Cuba "lacking the important technical expertise to develop world class athletes. . . imported coaches and exported athletes to achieve results". Amdur stated that several coaches from the USSR and other eastern-bloc countries are "on assignments" in Cuba and that a number of Cuban athletes had been training in the Soviet Union. As well as the criticisms of Cubans using Russian coaches there have also been comments that like the Russians, the amateur status of the Cubans is in doubt. Similarly criticism has been made of the way Cuba manipulates medal tables at major sport events. By dividing the number of medals won by the population of the country Cubans are able to show that they win far more medals per head of population than their imperialist rivals. It has also been suggested that Cuba, instead of following the accepted practice of counting one medal for a team win,

counts one Medal for every member of the team.[4] The final example of Cuba's political use of sport that will be covered in this paper concerns the author's personal experience. In attempting to obtain information on Sport in Cuba the author wrote to the Cuban Embassy in Ottawa. The information that was sent was a two-page document entitled "Cuban Sports in Broad Outlines". The document not only contains several slanted statements but also several "errors". It credits Cuban sprinter Enrique Figuerola with having won Cuba's first Olympic Gold Medal in the 1964 Olympics. Figuerola, in fact, won the silver medal in the 100 metres behind Bob Hayes of the United States. Reference is also made to world record holding sprinter, Silvio Leonard. While Leonard is one of Cuba's and in fact the world's best sprinters, he has never held a world record. Finally the document makes reference to Olympic title holder in the hurdles Alejandro Casanas. Casanas has never won the Olympic gold medal or held the Olympic record. He was a silver medalist in Montreal, losing to Guy Drut of France, and in 1980 he was once again a silver medalist, losing to Thomas Munkelt of the GDR.

As this paper has attempted to show since the revolution there have been several instances of Cuba's political involvement in sport. It is important to note however that in addition to her political use of sport one other fact readily emerges from the literature on Cuba. That is, within the last twenty years, with the possible exception of the GDR, Cuba has the fastest developing sports programs in the world. Consequently whatever our feelings or political biases towards this country it would appear that we have much to learn by studying her sports programs.

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[4] See Bohemia, August 20, 1971.

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